

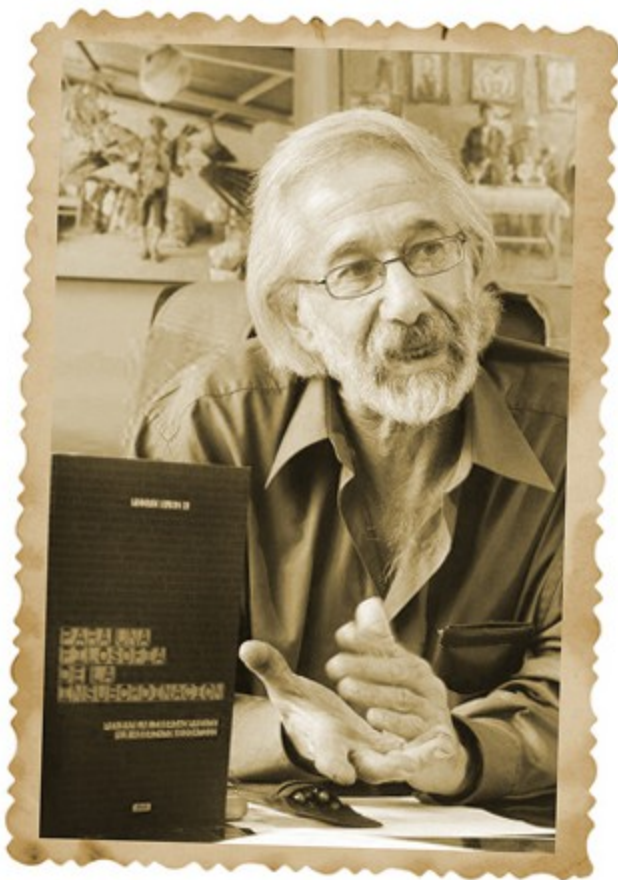


Chellis  
Glendinning

**A Radical Imagination:  
Dilemmas and desire while reading Pedro Susz**

**Chellis Glendinning**

(Published by [www.counterpunch.org](http://www.counterpunch.org) 11 December 2013 and  
[www.theragblog.blogspot.com](http://www.theragblog.blogspot.com) 19 February 2014)



*Susz with Para una filosofía de la insubordinación. Photo from La Razón.*

Pedro Susz is like a diamond; he has many facets. It's not just that *Para una filosofía de la insubordinación* (La Paz, Bolivia: Plural Editores, 2012) reveals the rare mind that integrates erudition with vision, the intellectual with the passionate; he gives philosophical reflection on today's pressing question: how can we traverse to the other side of the confusion and cynicism overwhelming us after all these centuries of too-often futile dissent against Power — particularly when the impulse to resist has disappeared not in Falcon sedans and military airplanes, but behind the electronic screen?

I think, therefore I am

*"Between the XV and XIX centuries the African continent lost more than 100,000,000 young men and women."* — Pedro Susz

After laying out the principles of quantum physics as his jump-off point for our efforts toward freedom and justice, Susz takes us on a journey through the philosophies that emerged from the European epochs of exploration, exploitation, and empire. Next we trek through ideas he calls "intermediary" such as Marx and Heidegger and then to postmodern, postcolonial, and multi/intercultural thought, all the while picking out the questions various philosophers have asked in an attempt to apply them to today's world.

Susz ends with an analysis of the challenge contemporary power presents: our total and involuntary encasement by the projections of industries/technologies of communication.

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He makes clear that philosophy seeks to clarify the relationship between human life, the conditions in which people live — as Foucault indicates, truth is a historical construction — and the essence of existence. The search, then, is never complete. In the end the nature of reality overpowers the capability of words to describe. As soon as one philosopher defines it, another puts her ideas to the fire of criticism. No sooner has Emmanuel Levinas touted the wonders of Liberation Theology than Slavoj Žižek points to its limitations. Heidegger is the cat's pajamas, Heidegger is *passé*. Frantz Fanon is too political. Etc. The search for truth also never ends because, due to the insatiability of Power, technology "advances," always to favor expansion, efficiency, and control, always transforming the socio-economic conditions of survival and therefore perceptions.

The mind is amazingly fluid. Universalities exist — birth, family, community, ecology, food, sex, ceremony, song, death — shaping limitations and possibilities, but the dynamic between thought and conditions produces a diversity of perspectives. The gratefulness to Mother Earth characterizing the spiritual ideas of Native peoples may spring from the practice of receiving food directly from their own mothers and from the waters, minerals, plants, and animals of nature.

What, then, do we think when we eat food from tin cans and plastic bags, made from chemicals whose names we cannot pronounce? Or when food scarcity, whose origins begin with ecological disasters and selective distribution by multinational corporations, causes starvation and riots?

The development of XV-XVII century European philosophy becomes more comprehensible. Suffering the collapse of ancient systems of land-based community, desperation from abusing their own lands, lack of sanitation, plagues, wars; uncertainty, fear, and hate — they created compensating concepts.

Science based in instrumental reason and the separation of humanity from nature, actions from values. Myths of universality and the birds-eye view (characteristics of post-traumatic stress). A psychology seated in the fracturing of mind from body (likewise). The superiority of upper classes, racists, and patriarchs. The arrogance to conquer everything — all of which not only offered psychological comfort, but supported bourgeois orderliness and the administration of Power.

For the thinkers coming afterward, the task became to put words to the effects of such a debacle and propose ways to strengthen insubordination. And here we are, centuries later, still trying to confront/dismantle/eradicate/escape/infiltrate/join/reject/replace/resist/subvert/take-on/take-over Power.

Times/spaces: A small detour

*...permanent insubordination, the dare of the moment, seems to be the only form of affirming our irreversible decision to reposition the dialogue, the creativity, the imagination... — P.S.*

During the 1980's and '90's the Elmwood Institute in Berkeley, California, presented a platform to develop dissident ideas. I was a member of the Council along with Fritjof Capra and Jerry Mander (both of whose work Susz mentions). Also Ernest Callenbach, Charlene Spretnak, and other thinkers/activists.

In 1991, in preparation for 1992, we met with colleagues from North American indigenous communities, including Jeannette Armstrong (Okanagan) and Larry Emerson (Diné). The aim: to explore connections between our ideas — to Capra, the New Paradigm — and traditional Native philosophies. For days and nights we shared thinking on the role of community, the politics of sovereignty, the nature of the cosmos, etc. — with remarkable frequency, the Natives teaching us.

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One of the shared ideas was that each creature, artifact, and inanimate object is made of energy; nothing is fixed, everything in transition. We agreed that linear time is a fantasy and that instead we exist in the presence of swirls and levels, multiplicities and synchronicities, suggesting a reality given to symbols, dreams, impenetrable mystery, chance, possibility. For us in Berkeley, the implications were spiritual and philosophical; we weren't able to formulate applications to the collective task of achieving justice and liberation.

Our Jacques Ellul Society/Mega-technology Conferences (1989-1996) aimed to amplify ideas and strategies for action. Again, Mander and Capra. Also Theodore Roszak, Vandana Shiva, Gustavo Esteva, etc. The approach was systemic analysis, considering not just the immediate dangers of specific technologies but the functioning of mass techno-capitalist civilization as a whole.

The content of our discussions is collected in the book *Turning Away from Technology* (1997): mega-technology and development; the relationship between government and promotion of new technologies; the ramifications of fragmentation and hyper-velocity; technological encasement and consciousness; etc.

When computers and cellular telephones were disseminated to consumers (the saving grace of a declining Wall Street), the institute collapsed — to my mind, the victim of these new means of communicating and the disorientation that this produced among us; in the analysis of Kirkpatrick Sale, because “We lost!” In the end our contribution was neither education concerning this missing thread of analysis in our social-change movements nor tactics for political action; it was solidarity, a precious quality but not the expansive one we had hoped for.

We were not the only ones incapable of proposing a next step—and for good reason: technological upheaval was turning the world upside down.

Toward postmodernism

*...a time in which nothing is what it seems and everything that appears is not. — P.S.*

The postmodern environment was one of lightning-fast links and interlinks, actions and interactions on a screen; mediated reality; non-stop innovation; the fracturing of person from meaning, action from effect; enforced relativity of experience, ideas, and events; individualism-on-steroids; the speed-up of the clock and shrinking of space; hyper-reality based in scandal and spectacle — producing the tool of deconstruction, yes, but also solipsism, expectations of cyber-paradise, a dogma of extreme relativity, paralysis and resignation.

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Susz's exploration of this world's way of thinking illuminates its major points of criticism. It describes a fleeting reality without location in body, place, matrix, history, will; it affirms the de-contextualization of discourse; it encourages nihilism and narcissism; it is synonymous with neo-conservatism; etc. Frederic Jameson highlights another angle: all of postmodernism's postulates are symptoms reflecting the experience of transnational globalization. He presents the notion, very much in line with a psychodynamic approach, that this stage has been necessary for illuminating capitalism's masks.

Passive consumers, we

*...the time we inhabit now seems the era of the revenge of the image... — P.S.*

*Para una filosofía de la insubordinación* reads like a Paco Taibo detective novel: we sense that it is going towards something but we can't imagine what that is — along the way creating a parallel universe of realizations in the reader. I haven't felt such ecstasy while reading since I devoured the works of Lewis Mumford 30 years ago.

At last — through centuries of changes and centuries of ideas about the changes — one glimpses a *dénouement* on the horizon. With his early development of what Régis Debray has called "mediology," Cornelius Castoriadis gives Susz the springboard he needs.

Although Castoriadis' declarations on the fissure between technological development and its lack of morality rings of a cost/benefit analysis that neutralizes censure, his insights into the effects of television — made remarkably early, in the 1970's — is extraordinary: TV's ability to perpetuate authority via imagery; its use to close off modern society from outside influences; loss of the collective/embodied agora in favor of a screen and the subsequent privatization of the individual; infantilizing of the viewer; wiping out of cultural memory; the mixing of fact with triviality until all becomes insignificant; perpetration of what Octavio Paz has called "Complacent Nihilism."

We are wedged, says Susz, between the media's mega-conglomeration achieving a global uniformity of thought that would have made Hitler envious — as Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno warned in 1947, a union "of Nazism and the North American cultural industry" — and castration of the potential for resistance due to its relentless emphasis on consumerism, publicity, and entertainment.

The subsequent "iconic overdose" "transforms the people (active political subjects) into the public (passive mass-media consumers)." Susz compares this "media labyrinth" with the myth of the Minotaur in which Minos traps the half-man/half-bull monster in a construction of impassable pathways — acting as dictator between people and reality; shaping ways of thinking, knowing, and feeling; drawing boundaries between what is admissible (Power) and what is not (insubordination).

Castoriadis comes alive with his concept of "radical imagination" as the essential element for mustering trails out of the labyrinth toward socio-political change. He proposes an

ontological leap toward cultures and institutions harvested from human heritage, and the scene is set for Susz's imaginative ideas.

Electronic "Republik"

*...the web, let's call it that, is constructed, woven, by a spider and, additionally, with a precise end in mind, to trap flies of the type the weaver eats. — P.S.*

At last the theme of techno-manipulation of time and space arrives. I have been waiting for this with bated breath, believing it will be the Turning Point. But instead follows a chapter covering theories on the effects of television. Laino and her Piaget-inspired ideas on the mimicry of behaviors enacted on the screen. Postmodernists showing how TV promotes capitalist values of bourgeois consumerism. Etc. And then the computer.

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Susz's insights never fail to blow the mind, and the chapter "The Digital Labyrinth" is the diamond of his thinking. He launches his discussion with the observation that "nobody feels called to think about the consequences of arrival to market of the newest model of vacuum cleaner" and an investigation into the ideas of Zizek on the internet from a Marxist viewpoint.

Why is this medium so seductive? Because it echoes the established paradox of contemporary image-based culture, juxtaposing the myth of objective truth against subjective experience. Because it dares to rupture traditional social roles, for instance that adults know how to do things better than young people. And because, according to Zizek, the all-important image is available thanks to this inscrutable machine, and so it becomes as sacred as the image; also, for his skill with the keyboard, the user feels like God creating virtual reality — an ironic, Mobius Loop-like compensation for his isolation behind the screen.

But then there is the personal stress of sifting through messages from one's 2,000 "friends" and the infinite, unceasing multiplication of data, situations that Susz says produce a "new state of slavery." There is the diminishment of the subject for lack of options offered by a controlled labyrinth telling one where to go and for lack of control over one's own creations on the net.

There is the conflict between the "freedom" of decentralization that the internet's marketing touts and the standardization/centralization of thinking perpetrated through both cyberspace and mass media, which José Luis Sánchez Noriega calls its "ontological regime." There is the propensity of empire to homogenize world cultures "inside the same commanding force characterized by consumerism and frivolity."



And the unrequited promise of “digital democracy.” This rapidly becomes a myth in the context of a technology whose motive is to maintain power not just via penetration, surveillance, mining, manipulation, and influence, but through the very structure of its machination that offers “a territory seeded with multiple false options, inherited prejudices, and the fears of each user of power’s infiltration.”

Too there are the false promises of “capitalism without frictions,” of “the imaginary communities installed on the web, giving pabulum to the supposed crack in the media monopoly,” of the machine’s amazing memory — the “Cloud” that Susz describes as “the dungeon of collective memory loss,” which in reality is a system of factory-warehouses harboring thousands of computers devouring enough mega-watts to demand a new Hoover-size dam while vomiting toxic chemicals.

And finally, the tragic defeat of a direct relationship between the embodied subject and a world — suffering extinction of the biosphere, species, communities, cultures, wisdom — that pleads for help to save its millions-of-years of evolution.

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Along the way, our author makes what he minimizes as a couple of “digressions.” In the first he presents what turns out to be an indispensable (and Jacques-Ellulian/Lewis-Mumfordian) clue: in order to comprehend the dynamics of Power, the necessity of investigating the correlation between the development of social organization and ideas with the history of technology.

The second is a response to the first, covering themes of the onset of mass mechanization — such as the divorce between technical dissemination and morality; the rationalization that technology is neutral; parallels between social forms put in place to facilitate the industrial revolution and the role of media; the entanglement of technics with belief in utopia.

Dilemmas and desire I

*A titanic force is needed to recover the right to say NO... — P.S.*

It can be no surprise that Susz identifies contemporary Power as the digital takeover. “Its weapons are not tanks, nor missiles, nor neutrons,” José Pablo Feinmann concurs. “It’s television. Film. Journalism. Magazines. Radio. Cable channels. And most formidably, the Internet.”

In his concluding chapter Susz applies his phenomenology of direct experience to what exists — these engines of consumerism and consciousness — with proposals for understanding and, with liberated software, using them better. After devouring such a stellar piece of work, I am suffering a letdown.

My focus lies on a different trajectory: roots and archetypes. Along with critique of mass techno-civilization, my spotlight is directed toward protecting/salvaging endangered qualities, forms, and practices that humans have developed for two million years. Ergo: I tend to see use of the cyber-technologies created to facilitate Power by transnational corporations, non-democratic governments, and the military as incongruous and yet another technological fix — not to mention the health threats posed by their dissemination of electromagnetic radiation.

I have learned, though, that differences in strategy can spring not from actual disagreement but from their positions in chronology. And, of course, from the strength of diversity of personalities and perspectives. We stand face-to-face with a predicament that invades and threatens every facet of life. If we apply the insight of Diné medicine man Larry Emerson — the treatment for ills caused by empire is the medicine created by empire — might the very technologies created by mega-civilization carry potential to unravel its own dysfunction?

It is because of such factors that Susz's conclusion presents, not a disappointment, but rather a challenge to widen my panorama.

#### Dilemmas and desire II

*We don't take note of reality just to register it, we do it to produce an effect... — P.S.*

Another challenge arises. Still Susz does not cross into the world of the imagination. For sure he has his suggestions on how to spark what Morris Berman has called “the re-enchantment of the world,” and with these he pulls no punches. Digital technology, he says, presents possibilities beyond modernism's obsessive singularity and postmodernism's excessive relativity; at the same time it echoes and supports the new forms of Power of techno-globalization.

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*He offers guiding principles garnered from quantum physics...*

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He offers guiding principles garnered from quantum physics: 1) “...time and space are intuitive forms inseparable from consciousness”; 2) “scientific fact does not exist”; 3) we reside in a state of “not-knowing”; 4) “... each part is its own whole and, at the same time, part of a greater whole”; and 5) the radical imagination is stirred by silence and reflection. With these he launches his aikido, reclaiming/reforming the concepts of the subject and the end of history lost in the swirl of postmodernism — via the frameless, experiential, always-unfinished, virtual image — until individuals become vibrant participants in history again.

But where is his exposition based on quantum physics of a radical use of time/space toward collective liberation? Through hundreds of pages I have waited for the illumination of a quantum insubordination. But, as in *Buen vivir: Para una democracia de la Tierra* by Giuseppe de Marzo — which contains only blank pages — our author, in



his own quantum way, leaves the invention of such ideas to the imagination of you and me...

### Spring of Questions

*I focus ...on a wide range of questions oriented toward mobilizing her/his own capacity for critique/reflection, that of the reader I mean... — P.S.*

In supposing that Susz would offer up new modes of launching rebellion, have I myself been complacent? I admit I don't know how to proceed in a way that doesn't repeat the same old political conundrums, that are not merely expressions of contemporary philosophies... but are effective.

How might we change the current obsession with time? Like a Tibetan Buddhist with her demons and deities, meditate on the forces of destruction, the quality of courage, and proud rebels of the past? Instead of shopping or aimlessly surfing the web, get together with our comrades to make history? Like a Luddite with his hammer, sever/scramble the sources of operation of the media, their satellite dishes, wireless antennas, and computer programs? Re-take art/craft via the traditions/visions of artists and land-based people? Participate in Slow Food and Slow Money? What would Slow Media look like? Slow Technology? In our meetings of the Jacques Ellul Society, we made a list of questions for judging technologies — for instance, what are its effects on the health of planet and person? Does it preserve or destroy biodiversity? Serve community? Produce equality — or concentrate power? Who does it benefit? How does it affect perception of our needs? Does it reduce, deaden, or enhance human creativity?

And what of the usurpation of space by the forces of Power? Might we re-dream dignity via the reuniting of mind with body, of human with nature? Launch movements without solo leaders, but with everyone equal and participating? Reflecting the Mariposa Effect, acknowledge that each radical provocation and each creation of sanctuary ricochets to all, thereby multiplying actions like springtime waterfalls? Inspired by India's Salt Marchers and today's cyber-whistleblowers, reject the construction of destructive public works like giant dams, oil pipelines, industrial-size mines, and towers spreading electromagnetic radiation? Join indigenous and secession movements seeking human-scale self-determination? Reclaim places "owned" by Power — farms, buildings, parks, factories, websites, ideas, interpretation — as do the hacienda-claimers in Brazil, the squatters of London, neighbors creating community gardens, hacker-journalists divulging Power's manipulations? Margara Millan proposes that we think of cities — constructed for the circulation of capital and machines — as "spaces in dispute"; we resist the separation between city and country by defending parks, planting seeds in every crack and plot, and farming public spaces; that we challenge the velocity of time by amplifying spaces for walkers and bicycles.

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Perhaps the task would require the perception of a shaman balanced between the nature of the cosmos and the laws of this world? Perhaps the result would be a politic like that of the Zapatistas — with its phenomenological confrontation in every moment (Now) in every place (Here)? With its vision of Mexico as a net of horizontal communities and its reconstruction of ancient/horizontal modes of self-government *incaracoles*/"snail shells"? With its dedication to land-based sustainability and celebration of the purity of a "future primitive"? With its Buddhist-like mindfulness and patience?

I am reminded of a conversation I had with a Keres man from Laguna Pueblo/New Mexico who had been elected his village's representative to the tribal council. Sitting on low-slung lawn chairs beneath an August full moon, Stan Lucero told me that his was the only village not using rational discussion; rather the elders consulted the spirits to determine how to vote; his job was merely to attend the council meeting to register the choice. I was brimming with envy when he turned to me. "You are fortunate," he said. "I am bound by tradition. You get to create the new ways."

Thinking as if Liberation is Possible

*...a perception that places in each of us the capacity, the tendency, to say "no" and to imagine that another reality is possible... — P.S.*

While *Para una filosofía de la insubordinación* doesn't conclude with the concrete suggestions toward a quantum politic I was hoping for, while its dynamism does not achieve a grand *denouement*, the book is something else. It's a *tour d'force* of analysis of historical philosophies, presenting one particularly radiant idea: the thoughts emerging or of interest in these times — quantum physics, ecological biology, interculturalism, Buddhism, etc. — contain the potential to shape our ideas about freedom and how we might pursue it.

*One thing is certain: after reading the book, it will be impossible to travel the labyrinths/streets/airways/television/newspapers/internet without a consciousness sorely sensitized and disquieted — but also animated. Like the Zapatistas, Susz implants the idea that we begin with What Is and, with the passion of a diamond flashing light, apply a radical imagination toward a future we cannot begin to guess.*